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# East Timor: High level of human rights abuses threaten ballot

With just seven weeks to go before the UN conducts a ballot on East Timor's future, an atmosphere of fear and insecurity persists in the disputed territory, Amnesty International delegates returning from a research visit said today at the launch of a major report.

"Serious human rights abuses are continuing and are undermining the East Timorese people's ability to exercise their rights, despite promises made by Indonesia to provide security for the East Timorese people," Amnesty International said. "If people do not feel safe, they will not be able to participate freely in the ballot."

"Responsibility for these abuses lies squarely with the newly-formed civilian militias in East Timor, and with those who have assisted and protected them, namely the Indonesian military forces, and to a lesser extent the Indonesian police."

The UN consultation process is the result of a tripartite agreement between Indonesia, Portugal and the UN signed on 5 May 1999. On 8 August 1999 the East Timorese will be able to decide whether to accept or reject a proposal for autonomy with Indonesia.

Amnesty International's report -- based on a May 1999 visit to Indonesia and East Timor -- documents a well-organised campaign to threaten and intimidate the population into supporting autonomy and to disrupt pro-independence groups' participation in the ballot process.

Pro-independence activists, students and civil servants are the main targets of this campaign with hundreds being arbitrarily arrested, tortured and ill-treated, "disappeared" or killed by civilian militias, operating with the support and at times direct involvement of the Indonesian security forces.

The current level of violence, ongoing human rights violations and forced relocation of some communities is impacting on all East Timorese, and has led to thousands of people fleeing their homes.

Human rights defenders and humanitarian workers have been threatened and some have gone into hiding. Both domestic and international journalists have also been threatened and beaten in an attempt to prevent them from reporting on militia attacks.

The Indonesian security forces are supporting and at times directly involved in militia attacks and pro-integrationist campaigns, despite Indonesian commitments under the Agreements to provide security to all East Timorese people and guarantee the neutrality of the security forces.

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Little, if any, action is being taken to prevent militia attacks, and hold those responsible to account for recent violations. Instead, the Indonesian authorities have recently recruited members of one of the most notorious militias into a civilian defence unit.

"If the Agreements are to have any chance of success, Indonesia must abide by its commitment to protect all East Timorese, to ensure the neutrality of the security forces and start arresting and bringing to justice those responsible for violations," said Amnesty International.

The international community must call on the Indonesian authorities to fulfil the promises they made under the Agreements and let the East Timorese people determine their future freely and without intimidation.

In view of widespread human rights violations by the militias and the links between militia and Indonesian army activities, Amnesty International is urging all governments to conduct an immediate review of all their military and defence links with Indonesia to ensure that such links are not contributing to human rights violations.

The East Timorese National Liberation Army, *Falintil,* has also been responsible for recent human rights abuses. "The independence leadership must take steps to ensure that *Falintil* acts in accordance with minimum international humanitarian standards. Their commitment to human rights protection within this process is vital."

"The UN ballot offers the chance to end 23 years of violence in East Timor," Amnesty International said. "If the popular consultation is not perceived to be fair by all parties involved, and the high level of human rights violations persists, the credibility of the whole process is undermined."

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**For a copy of the report, *East Timor: Seize the moment (ASA 21/49/99)*, or to arrange an interview, please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on: + 44 171 413 5566. A 4-page executive summary of the report is also available.**